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AUTHOR Baranowski, Marc D.
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ABSTRACT

Research examining the relationship between the frequency of grandchildrens' contact with grandparents and attitudes toward the elderly has produced conflicting results. In order to determine what kinds of contact between young people and their grandparents were meaningful and important to adolescents, interviews were conducted with 32 adolescents (16 males and 16 females). Based on their responses, seven questions were constructed to produce a measure of quality of grandparent-grandchild interaction. High school students (N=390) completed this questionnaire, as well as questions about demographics and frequency of contact with grandparents, an empathy scale, and the Aging Opinion Survey. Analyses of results supported the previously documented importance of grandparents as family historians and showed that grandparents often influence the parent-child relationship by talking about what the child's parents were like when younger. Results also showed that grandparents play a role in their grandchildren's lives by teaching skills, hobbies, and sports. Findings suggest that quality of interaction with grandparents is a significant predictor of attitudes, while frequency of contact with a favorite grandparent is not. (PAS)

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RELATIONS WITH GRANDPARENTS AS A PREDICTOR OF ADOLESCENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARD THE ELDERLY*

Marc D. Baranowski, Ph.D.
School of Human Development
University of Maine at Orono
Orono, ME. 04469

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In the search for sources of young people's attitudes toward older adults, the frequency and nature of interaction between young people and the elderly have been suggested as potentially important explanatory variables (Kogan, 1979). Mead (1974) and Troll (1982) noted that because grandparents are often the older adults with whom a child has the greatest likelihood of meaningful ongoing contact, relations between these two generations might be a potent influence on the developing child's attitudes toward older adults in general. In a sense, grandparents may serve as prototypical older people for the development of the young person's views of the elderly.

Research that has examined the relationship between the frequency of grandchildren's contact with grandparents and attitudes toward the elderly has produced conflicting results. Research with high school students (Ivester & King, 1977) and college students (Naus, 1973) found no significant association between frequency of contact with grandparents and attitudes toward older adults. Rosencranz and McNevin (1969), however, found that college students who saw their grandparents frequently (at least once a week) had more favorable view of older adults than did those who seldom or never saw their grandparents, and Guptill (1979) reported a similar finding for a large sample of students aged ten to twenty-three.

One possible explanation for these contradictory results is that frequency of contact gives very little information about the quality or meaningfulness of the relations between youths and their grandparents. As Green (1981) and Thorson and Perkins (1980-81) have noted, there is a need to look beyond frequency of contact to the potentially more revealing qualitative and situational aspects of interaction that may be important

determinants of young people's attitudes toward older adults.

Another issue that needs further clarification is the relationship between personality characteristics and attitudes toward older adults. Kogan (1961) found a positive correlation between attitudes toward the elderly and the characteristic of nurturance, and a negative relationship between attitudes and the characteristics of authoritarianism and anomie. Thorson and Perkins (1980-81) utilizing the Edwards Personal Preference Schedule (EPPS), found significant correlations between four personality traits of college students and attitudes toward older adults. However, these four traits combined explained only ten per cent of the variance in attitudes.

One potentially important personality characteristic that has not been examined in relation to attitudes toward older adults is emotional empathy. According to Mehrabian and Epstein (1972), emotional empathy is the extent to which a person shares the feelings of others, "at least at the gross affect (pleasant-unpleasant) level" (p. 525). Measures of attitudes toward older adults appear to ask the young respondent to empathize, that is, place himself or herself "in the shoes" of the older person. The extent to which an adolescent is empathic should therefore be related to his or her attitudes toward the elderly.

Finally, studies that have examined the relationships between demographic characteristics and attitudes toward older adults have produced conflicting results with regard to the effects of sex, social class, and age (Glass & Trent, 1980; McTavish, 1971; Rosencranz & McNevin, 1969; Thorson, 1974; Thorson & Perkins, 1980-81). Further research is necessary

to clarify the influence of these variables on young people's attitudes toward the elderly.

Therefore, based upon the current evidence, the present study was designed to answer the following questions:

(1) What types of meaningful or important interactions with grandparents do adolescents report having taken place during their lives?

(2) What proportion of variance in adolescents' attitudes toward the elderly is accounted for by a linear combination of the following variables: frequency of interaction with a favorite grandparent during the last year, quality of interaction with grandparents, emotional empathy, social class, sex, and age?

METHOD

Instrument Development

In order to determine what kinds of contact between young people and their grandparents were meaningful and important to adolescents, interviews were conducted with 32 adolescents (16 males, 16 females; mean age 16.9 years) attending a rural Maine high school. Respondents were asked to tell the interviewer about their grandparents and to describe the types of interaction with their grandparents that had been most meaningful and important to them. The following were mentioned by interviewees as important types of interaction that had taken place with grandparents (with the number in parentheses denoting the number of respondents who mentioned that type of interaction): learning a hobby, sport, or skill from a grandparent (N=18); having a really personal conversation with a grandparent (N=18); learning about family history (N=17); doing work for or with a grandparent (N=12); hearing stories about

what their parents were like when the parents were younger (N=11); taking a trip or vacation with grandparents when parents weren't along (N=5); being given useful advice by a grandparent (N=4). Based on these responses, seven questions (answered "yes" or "no") about types of interaction with grandparents were constructed for use in the present questionnaire study (see Table 1). The scores on the seven questions were summed to produce a measure of quality of grandparent-grandchild interaction, with higher scores considered a higher quality relationship.

In addition to the interaction questions, the following were included in the questionnaire:

(1) A question asking respondents which of their grandparents they most liked to spend time with, and how frequently they had seen that grandparent in the last year (a five-point scale with responses ranging from "never" to "every day").

(2) Questions about demographic information--sex, age, and father's education. Spanier (1976) found father's education the most reliable measure of social class for adolescent samples because it was easily remembered, relatively constant from year to year, and most highly intercorrelated with other measures of social class.

(3) The Mehrabian and Epstein (1972) Empathy Scale, a 33 item Likert measure of emotional empathy. This scale was validated for use with adolescent samples by Adams, Schvaneveldt and Johnson (1979).

(4) The Social Value of the Elderly scale of the Aging Opinion Survey (1980), designed to assess attitudes toward older adults.

The Aging Opinion Survey (AOS) consists of three scales, each representing a specific aspect of attitudes: (1) Stereotypic Age

Decrement--views of the aging process in friends and peers; (2) Personal Anxiety Toward Aging--views of the aging process in onself; and (3) Social Value of the Elderly--views of the worth and value of older adults as a group. Factor analytic procedures carried out by Kafer et al. (1980) indicated that each of these scales may be regarded as a separate factor. Because the purpose of the present study was to examine adolescents' attitudes toward the elderly as a group rather than attitudes toward aging in self or peers, only the third scale was used. This scale is composed of 15 Likert-type items such as "Society would benefit if the elderly had more say in government" and "Older people are more or less a burden for the young." A scale of 1 to 5 representing responses varying from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" was provided for each statement. Higher scores represent a more positive evaluation of the social worth and value of older adults.

Participants and Procedure

Participants in the study were 186 tenth-grade and 204 twelfth-grade volunteers (191 males, 199 females) from three rural high schools in Maine. The age range was 15 to 19 years ($\bar{X}$=16.3). The sample was 59% Catholic and 23% Protestant, with a majority of the remaining subjects indicating no religious preference. All respondents were Causasian. The mean number of years of father's education was 12.2 years (range 6-20 years) and for mothers 12.1 years (range 7-18 years); high school graduate was the mode for both parents.

All questionnaires were completed in a classroom setting with a teacher present.

RESULTS

Of the types of grandparent-grandchild interaction measured in this study, having been told stories about their parents (81%) and about family history (73%) were mentioned by the greatest number of adolescents (see Table 1). A majority of adolescents had learned a skill, hobby, or sport from their grandparents (60%) and had done work for or with a grandparent (52%). Having had a really personal conversation with a grandparent and having taken a trip with a grandparent were experiences that only one-third of the sample reported having occurred.

Table 1. Items on the Quality of Grandparent-Grandchild Interaction Scale (N=390)

Interaction Question	% Responding "Yes"
1. Have you ever learned a skill, hobby, or sport from any of your grandparents?	60
2. Have you ever done any work for or with any of your grandparents?	52
3. Have you ever had a really personal conversation with any of your grandparents?	33
4. Have any of your grandparents ever talked to you about your family's history?	73
5. Have your grandparents told you stories about what your parents were like when they were younger?	81
6. Have you ever taken a trip or vacation with any of your grandparents when your parents weren't along?	32
7. Have your grandparents ever given you advice or tried to influence your opinion in any way?	48

Scores on the Quality of Grandparent-Grandchild Interaction scale (the seven items summed) ranged from 0 to 7 ($\bar{X}$=3.83, SD=2.07). Item-total correlations ranged from .50 to .55, and the reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) of the scale was .76. Quality of interaction was positively and significantly correlated with social value of the elderly (r=.21, p<.001), frequency of interaction with a favored grandparent (r=.23, p<.001), emotional empathy (r=.14, p<.01), and social class (r=.13, p<.01), but not significantly correlated with sex (r=.08) or age (r=.01) of the adolescent (Table 2).

Mean score on the Social Value of the Elderly scale was 50.46 (SD=6.41). Since a score of 45 represents a neutral (undecided) score on this scale and higher scores are indicative of more positive attitudes toward the elderly, this sample collectively holds what might best be described as a "moderately positive" view of older adults. As indicated in Table 2, social value of the elderly was positively and significantly related to emotional empathy (r=.28, p<.001), quality of interaction (r=.21, p<.001), and social class (r=.18, p<.001), but was not significantly correlated with the remaining variables.

Results of the multiple regression (stepwise, forward inclusion) with social value of the elderly as the dependent variable are shown in Table 3. With the tolerance value for entry of an independent variable into the equation set at .01, only three variables--emotional empathy (beta=.28), quality of interaction with grandparents (beta=.17), and social class (beta=.15)--produced a statistically significant increase in the multiple R and were entered into the equation. These three variables accounted for 13 per cent of the variance in social value of the elderly, with empathy accounting for the most variance. With forced entry, the remaining

Table 2. Correlation Matrix of Variables in the Study (N=390)

Variable	Quality of Interaction	Freq. of Contact	Emotional Empathy	Social Class	Age	Sex
Social Value of the Elderly	.21[a]	.00	.28[a]	.18[a]	.06	.09
Quality of Gp-Gc Interaction		.23[a]	.14[b]	.13[b]	-.01	.08
Freq. of Contact w. Favorite Grandparent			.01	.13[b]	.07	-.08
Emotional Empathy				.05	.06	.52[a]
Social Class					-.10[c]	-.02
Age of Student						.00

[a] Significant at .001 level (two-tailed test)

[b] Significant at .01 level

[c] Significant at .05 level

Table 3. Regression of Predictor Variables on Social Value of the Elderly (N=390)

Predictor	Beta	Mult R	R^2	R^2 Change	F for R^2 Change	Signif. of R^2 Change
Emotional Empathy	.28	.28	.08	.08	33.96	.000
Quality of Gp-Gc Interaction	.17	.33	.11	.03	12.58	.000
Social Class	.15	.36	.13	.02	9.65	.002
Freq. of Contact w. Favorite Gp	.05	Not entered				
Age of Student	.07	Not entered				
Sex of Student	-.07	Not entered				

three variables combined accounted for only slightly more than a one per cent increase in R^2.

DISCUSSION

The finding that nearly three-quarters of the adolescents in the survey study said their grandparents had told them about their family's history supports the findings from previous studies with other age groups on the importance of grandparents as family historians (Robertson, 1976; Updegraff, 1968). One sixteen-year-old boy in the interview sample was particularly explicit with regard to this "roots" function: "When dad's father talks about what our family was like in the past, it's sort of like the television show Roots. You get to know where you came from and who you really are." According to Erikson (1968) finding out "who you really are" -- identity formation -- is the primary task of adolescence. As Kilpatrick (1974) has noted, a sense of continuity with the past is essential for the development of identity, and grandparents may play a role in helping provide this historical continuity.

From the results of this study, it is also apparent that most children are given information by their grandparents about what the child's parents were like when the parents were younger. Mead (1974) noted that parents are often unwilling to tell their children about their own childhood and adolescent years, but that this kind of information is necessary if young people are to understand why their parents think and act in particular ways. Grandparents, then, may give children a more realistic view of their parents and thereby influence the parent-child relationship.

The present study suggests that grandparents also play a role in their grandchildren's lives by teaching skills, hobbies, and sports. While the importance of these skills for the everyday functioning of adolescents cannot be determined from these data, in the preliminary interviews several adolescents stated that the types of skills learned from grandparents were those that parents, peers, and schools were unable or unwilling to teach, e.g., woodcarving, building construction, cooking on a woodstove, weather predicting, and weaving.

It is interesting to consider the contrast between these results and those provided by the Neugarten and Weinstein (1964) interviews with grandparents. In that study, fewer than half the grandparents stated that they taught their grandchildren special skills or crafts, and only 4% of the grandmothers and 11% of the grandfathers considered the primary significance of the grandparent role as being a teacher or resource person. It may be that what grandparents see as significant or satisfying in the grandparents role is different from what is considered important by grandchildren. Another consideration is that Neugarten and Weinstein's sample was urban while the sample in the present study was rural. It is possible that teaching and learning practical skills or crafts are regarded as more important in a rural than urban environment.

Finally, the attempt to predict attitudes toward older adults was not particularly successful, with only 13 per cent of the variance accounted for. The results did reveal that quality of interaction with grandparents was a significant predictor of attitudes, while frequency of contact with a favorite grandparent was not. However, since

emotional empathy accounted for more variance in attitudes than did interaction with grandparents, it would appear that personality traits are more critical than social contact for the formation of attitudes. It may be that the measure of grandparent-grandchild interaction developed for this study needs to be improved upon in order to assess the key aspects of intergenerational contact. A more comprehensive measure of grandparent-grandchild interaction including duration of contact, age at which the contact occurred, and affective meaning of the interaction for the young person could determine more precisely the nature and impact of grandparent-grandchild ties.

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